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DIRECT APPROACH AS A METHOD IN BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY

By WILLIAM LEON DAWSON

WITH EIGHT PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

IT IS USUALLY assumed that a bird-photographer works from a blind. The customary compliment paid to the writer when his photographs are shown is upon his *patience*. Never was a compliment wider of the mark. I am not a patient man. I am as little patient as a mountain torrent—Oh, a few “darkling pools” and placid stretches, to be sure, but for the most part dashing, foaming, fretting, plunging on to the sea. And by the same token it has always seemed to me that bird photography from a blind bears about the same relation to bird photography in the open that juggling for catfish does to fly-fishing. Pound for pound the juggler probably has the advantage, and we concede that the quality of his catch is above reproach; but the fly-caster, whether he lands a string of sparkling beauties or not, has always a glorious good time, and he knows in his heart that the tamer methods are not for him.

Of course it is a matter of psychology, the difference between the waiting game and the aggressive, the store-keeper and the drummer. Being, therefore, a bit of a drummer himself, the writer will confess at once that he never took a dozen photographs from a blind in his life; and that when he wants portraits of birds he does precisely what he does when he wants subscribers to “The Birds of California”; viz., goes after them.

But there is the psychology again; you can’t “rush” birds any more than you can humans. Not as often, in fact. There is, often, in humans a fund of good nature which will bear with sudden approach, and occasionally a fund of accumulated interest (in your subject, whatever it may be) that justifies quick action. But save in those rare cases where curiosity enters in, your claim-in-advance upon the forbearance or indulgent attention of a bird is absolutely nil. His approachability is measured only by his inertia, and that, in a creature so mobile, is very small in-



INATTENTIVE—White-faced Glossy Ibises at Laguna Blanca

*From a Photograph, Copyright 1913
by W. L. Dawson*

deed. Hence, artifice, dissimulation, use of cover, and above all, inconspicuousness, are essential elements of address.

Now and then, by virtue of previous knowledge of a bird's whereabouts, and good cover, one can manage to confront his subject suddenly, and swing on it in the moment of startled surprise preceding flight. But such opportunities are as rare as they are gratifying. Moreover, the difficulty of getting the focus even with a reflecting camera in that horribly brief instant of suspense makes this method a form of gambling.

The ordinary way is to mark down your bird, make use of cover as far as you can, merely to save time, and then when it fails try direct approach. The es-



Fig. 2. A PASADENA THRASHER AT LOS COLIBRIS

sential elements here are inconspicuousness of dress, avoidance of direct gaze, and extreme slowness of movement. A due consideration of these three essentials will sometimes yield amazing and gratifying results. These three things are, of course, three subtractions of the ordinary characteristics of man. Deliberateness of movement is of the utmost importance. At critical junctures a movement almost as slow as the hands of a clock will repay the effort (for effort it certainly is, ten times more laborious and sweat-producing than ordinary motion). Even when a bird's suspicion has been aroused, it may be diverted or allayed by discreet restraint. None of the bird's enemies, save the cat, moves in this fashion. The pace of the tortoise does not fit into the bird's category of dangers, and hence

is dismissed. Moreover, a bird easily suffers a fatigue of attention. It suspects and scrutinizes, and because no crisis arises, it forgets in the very act of looking. A sand flea diverts its attention and it stops to pick it up and casts about for another one. Or it tests you repeatedly by a perking of the head, or by a threatened

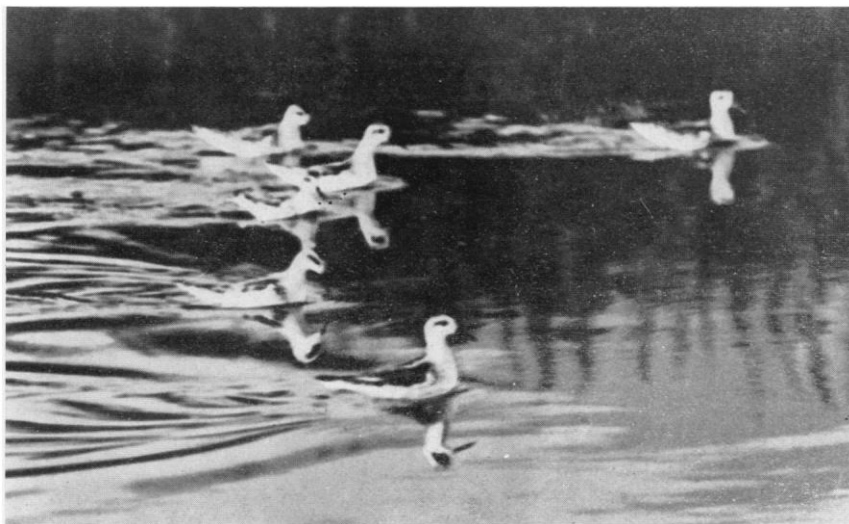


Fig. 3. THE RACE: NORTHERN PHALAROPES ON THE ESTERO, SANTA BARBARA
From a photograph, copyright, 1913, by W. L. Dawson

uplifting of the wing. If there is no reciprocal motion on your part, no answering gleam of intelligence, the bird's suspicions are allayed, and it resumes its feeding or its siesta.

It is usually very necessary to avert the gaze. A bird which will suffer your mere presence in unconcern at twenty feet, might flee upon the instant if it caught



Fig. 4. SANDERLINGS AT SANDYLANDS

the glint of your eye. However innocent your intention, that spark explodes a train of sad recollections. You belong to the gun-carrying species. *Homo sanguineus* is your specific name in bird-Latin. Whether sub-species *amabilis* or no the bird will determine at safer range. The reflecting camera enables one to avoid this

difficulty. I habitually advance with downcast eyes, thus presenting a bowl of brown khaki instead of telltale gleams; or, if I require to re-locate my birds, steal a glance through the camera.

Color harmony in dress is to be cultivated solely insofar as it lends to inconspicuousness. The slightest display of white or any bright color is to be avoided, not only because it draws attention at the outset, but because it emphasizes motion. You may move a brown sleeve slowly through the air without provoking flight, where the slightest oscillation of a white cuff would send your quarry scattering.

In approaching shore-birds, especially, it is desirable to disguise the man-like qualities by altered posture. Ground-feeding birds hold any object in fear in direct ratio to its elevation, or one might almost say to the square of its elevation. A man on hands and knees is not half so terrible as one standing, while a prone figure, although just as surely seen, scarce seems to threaten at all.



Fig. 5. LONG-BILLED DOWITCHERS AND WESTERN WILLET AT SANDYLANDS;
APPROACHED WITHOUT COVER

The suppression of noise is also important, though not paramount. Save in the case of unusual sounds, it is not the noise in itself which is fright-provoking, but its connection with a suspected object. In case of camera noises it is necessary to conduct a rapid course of education. The first roar of a focal-plane shutter will startle any bird, but if it is delivered by a motionless person at a distance, and no harm follows, the birds quickly accept it as part of the established order of things, and will submit to it, thereafter, at any range, without question. In direct approach, therefore, it is well to accustom the birds to the sound of your shutter at a distance, so that it may no longer complicate your situation. In this way one can take repeated shots at close quarters, where, if the noise had been held in reserve, only one would have been possible.

As a concrete and rather extreme example of the success of these methods, let me instance the White-faced Glossy Ibises herein portrayed. On the fourth day of September last, I sighted these Ibises as they settled in the edge of the

water at Laguna Blanca, a small, semi-artificial lakelet of some sixty acres, near Santa Barbara. In endeavoring to stalk them, the birds became so thoroughly frightened that they were on the point of quitting the neighborhood, and were



Fig. 6. THE IBISES: THE FIRST SHOT AT 150 FEET



Fig. 7. TWO JACKERS: WHITE-FACED GLOSSY IBISES AT LAGUNA BLANCA; TAKEN AT A RANGE OF ABOUT 50 FEET

only induced to reconsider by my own ostentatious withdrawal in the automobile. Noting from a distance of half a mile their gradual return and final precipitation, I turned back and in a circle of the boulevard surrounding the lake discovered

their whereabouts in a perfectly open place some forty feet from shore and 150 from the road. Passing as though unheeding, I sought cover, arranged the camera, made a trial focus, and set out to return. When exactly opposite, I brought the machine to a quick stop, threw off the motor and swung on the birds. At the sound of the shutter they leaped clear of the water in their astonishment, and although they fell back again, regarded me with ugly suspicion. Again I snapped and again the birds leaped two feet in air. With this by way of inauspicious beginning, and without a shred of cover, I advanced directly and *very slowly*, snapping every ten feet or so, until I stood, with plates exhausted, at the water's edge.

Returning an hour later with a fresh relay of plates I repeated the tactics of cautious advance, and took up the active work of photographing at the point where



Fig. 8. WITH WINGS UPLIFTED: WHITE-FACED GLOSSY IBISES AT LAGUNA BLANCA;
TAKEN AT A RANGE OF 25 FEET

From a photograph, copyright, 1913, by W. I. Dawson

I had left off. Not content with this, I waded out toward the birds, taking care not to make a sound in withdrawing the feet from the deep mud, until I had the birds at twenty-five feet, practically indifferent to my presence. Here I blazed away to heart's content. That the birds were nowise constrained by my presence is evidenced by the postures of repose, of stretching, yawning, or taking of baths, and the search for food, all faithfully recorded.

Truth to tell, I did overstep the limits of the birds' patience at last by attempting another advance, and just as my last footfall was sinking at the predetermined distance of fifteen feet, the Ibises rose in high dudgeon, circled to a height of half a mile, then moved in a southeasterly direction till lost from sight. But I make no complaint; here was heavenly sport while it lasted.